

Online Support for a Distance Learning Course “Research in English Language Teaching”

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study of how an online learning support for the distance learning course “Research in English Language teaching (ELT)” has been designed, developed, and delivered to distance students at Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. It begins with the context in which the course is offered, followed by discussion on the nature of the distance learning course, its blue print, instructional delivery, learning support, and media used. Online learning support for the course is discussed in terms of its design and delivery, online components of the course, students’ participation, interaction and communication, learning style, and tutoring style. Assessment of student learning for the course is presented in terms of its components, namely participation, assignment, discussion, and examination. This paper concludes that online learning support assists student learning in ways that enhance student learning. This is particularly relevant to the objective of the course to develop student ability to do research in ELT to improve the quality of the English language instruction.

Introduction

Upgrading the qualifications of teachers have become the interests of many stakeholders, including the governments, educational authorities, school systems, and teachers themselves. Teacher training and upgrading have been implemented in different ways, depending on the policies adopted by the government and educational authorities. In most countries, upgrading involve both the training and retraining of teachers. Indonesia has a large number of teachers that need upgrading of qualifications, including those subject matter teachers in secondary schools.

In the old days, many subject matter teachers, including English teachers, were trained up to diploma levels, namely a college training up to one, two or a maximum of three years. Recently, however, since 1999, a new Law has been implemented that has minimum requirements for teachers to have at least Bachelor degrees. Many teachers have to upgrade their qualifications to meet regulatory requirements. As some teachers work in far remote places with no easy access to an on-campus higher education, they opt for a distance learning program offered by Universitas Terbuka (UT), an open university which offers programs only via distance learning mode.

As of November 2012, the UT has a total of 565,264 distance students studying various programs in four Faculties (Teacher Training and Educational Science, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Social and Political Sciences, Economics) and the Graduate Program. Programs in teacher education are offered by the Faculty of Teacher Training and Educational Sciences, which has a total of 434,949 students or 76.95% of the total student body (UT, 2013). The Faculty offers programs for in-service teachers only using distance learning mode. Students study from a variety of media and have to take up to 144 semester credit hour (SKS) to accomplish the Bachelor program. Some students may have to take less than 144 SKS, depending on the previous educational backgrounds of the teacher students.

The Faculty of Teacher Training and Educational Sciences has four academic Departments, namely the Departments of Language Education, Social Studies Education, Mathematics and Science Education, and Basic Education. the Department of Language Education has two Study Programs, namely English Language Education Program and Indonesian Language Education, with a total of 5,791 students. The English Language Education Study Program has a total of over 3,723 in-service English teacher students studying from various of the country using distance learning methods.

The English Language Teacher Education Program at Universitas Terbuka

The English Language Education Study Program offers distance learning courses for in-service English language teachers. Students of the Program may have different levels of educational backgrounds, including those with high-school certificate, and those with university diplomas in the English language education or English language. A Bachelor program in English language education requires students to accomplish 144 SKS, while those with previous university diplomas in relevant fields may take less than SKS depending on the levels of previous qualifications (UT, 2012).

The curricular objective of the Program is to develop the ability of professional English teachers at school using distance learning methods. After completing the Program, students are expected to have the following core competencies.

- a) Understanding of high school student characteristics.
- b) Knowledge of English language to teach high school students.
- c) Instructional strategies in English language teaching in high schools.
- d) Ability to manage an English language classroom.
- e) Ability to use a variety of media and instructional technology.
- f) Ability to serve as a professional English teacher.
- g) Ability to serve as role models for students.
- h) Ability to improve the quality of instruction through research.

There are also several supporting and other competencies to achieve by students after completing this Program (UT, 2012).

Courses for the Program are organized to meet the curricular goals and competency development of students. Courses offered include the development of English language skills, knowledge of English language components, the science of language, teaching and learning in English language, research in English language teaching, English for specific purposes, and other courses to support the development of teacher competencies. The duration of the program and number of SKS to be completed depends on the previous educational background levels of the students. A typical student with a high school level certificate background will have to take 144 SKS to complete the Program, while a student with a Diploma I, II, III in English language education will have to accomplish as many as 110, 84, 44 SKS to get a Bachelor degree in English language education (UT, 2012).

Studying in this program uses only distance learning methods. Once students register for the Program, they take courses according to their individual pace. Students will get the printed learning materials sent by post to their respective addresses. The learning printed materials serve as one the main learning resource and reference for the students studying a particular course. The printed learning materials have been designed in such a way following instructional design principles materials to meet the students' independent learning needs. Students then will have the opportunity to study the materials, work on self-assessed exercises and formative tests. Students are also provided with broadcast materials via radio and television as well as other non-printed materials.

In terms of learning support provided by the institution, students may have access the face-to-face tutorial support, organized by the UT Regional Office in the proximity of the students' residences. Through this face-to-face tutorial support, students will have the opportunity to interact and learn with the tutor and peers. Students' assignments in this face-to-face tutorial contribute up to 50% to the final semester grade. The challenge for the students is to come to a certain location to attend the face-to-face tutorial locations. For those students living in remote and isolated areas, attending face-to-face tutorial activities will be difficult.

Students also have access to online learning resources provided at no charge by the university, such as online discussion forum, online counseling, online learning materials via UT digital library, and online tutorials. With an additional fee, students may also opt to take an online semester examination with certain reasons. Starting 2013, all UT courses in all Study Programs, including the English Language Education Program are supported with online tutorials at no charge. Students may opt to participate in this online tutorial that may suit the need in terms of flexibility, access and costs. Assignments for this online tutorial contributes up to 30% to the final semester grade. There has been increasing number of students participating in online tutorials, thanks to its relatively easier of access and participation in such an online learning activities.

To enrich distance students' learning, the UT students also have access to OER, which is also open to the public. UT OER include, "*Guru Pintar*" Online (which literally means smart teacher), ITV-UT (Internet TV), UT Open Courseware, and so forth. Resources within the UT OER increase in terms of quality and

quantity, as academic staff members as well as tutors and the public are encouraged to contribute and share their good practice in UT OER.

The Distance Learning Course “Research in ELT”

Nature of the course. The course “PBIS 4401/Research in ELT” is one of courses offered by the English Language Education Study Program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education Sciences of Universitas Terbuka. As one of the distance learning courses, the content of the course is presented in the form of printed modules as media for independent learning by students. It is a three-credit course which has units of learning divided into nine modules. Each module discusses topics and subtopics represented into three to four learning activities. Other instructional designers use the term units or blocks instead of modules which refers to subdivision of the course’s content (Simonson, *et.al*, 2012, p. 169). The objective of this course is to develop the students’ ability to conduct research in English language teaching. By having the competency in research in teaching and learning English as second language, the students who are English teachers will be able to apply classroom action research, classroom research and case study to address problems and improve quality of their English language teaching. These three research methods are chosen as the main topics in this course as they are frequently applied by the teachers of English in improving their teaching quality.

Who takes the course. The students are required to take this course before they take the enhancement of professional competence course which demands the students to apply research in English language teaching. Therefore, the students should be able to understand classroom research design and write research proposal to improve the teaching and learning process that they carry out as English teachers. All these abilities are gained through taking the PBIS 4401/Research in ELT course. In 2013.1, a total of 413 students took the course, of which 136 students signed up for the online tutorial of the course, and 105 students were actively engaged in the online tutorial activities.

Curricular content. The PBIS 4401/Research in ELT course contains subject matter that deals with the main issues in English language learning and teaching, data collection techniques, the implementation of classroom action research, classroom research, case study research, English language teaching research design, how to write research proposal, data analysis, data interpretation, and how to write research report. These modules are to provide sets of research design that will enable students of the English Language Education Program to deal effectively with many of the problems that confront them as they implement the teaching of English language at schools. It provides teachers a “process of inquiry” (Stringer, 2007) to find effective solution of teaching problems, particularly in the English language instruction.

Course blue print. This course provides a resource material of doing research in teaching English as a second language for the students, to assist them in their efforts to conduct inquiry and to enhance their skills in finding solution in their problems of English language teaching. The main competence of this course is to provide students to be able to do research in English Language Teaching. To gain the main competence, there are nine indicators to support the main competence represented into nine modules. As seen in the competence map (Antoro, 2009, p. iii), the first module talks about issues of research in English Language Teaching. Module two presents the theoretical method of data collection. It provides with techniques of gathering data in research of teaching English. Module three provides a description of steps in the implementation of classroom action research. It represents the planning, doing action research, and reflection and evaluation of the action. Module four discusses research design in classroom research. It covers the discussion of survey, experiment research, stimulated recall, and interaction analysis. Module five focuses on the description of how to implement case study. Module six represents detail procedures in designing research in English language teaching. Module seven talks about writing research proposal. Module eight suggests ways of data analysis both on quantitative and qualitative data. And finally module nine provides procedures and steps in writing research report.

Course instructional delivery. The course is delivered in the form of asynchronous and synchronous system. In the asynchronous system, the course has been developed based on printed materials to support the students’ independent learning. The participants will be able to learn and practice doing research by following all instructions in the courses. The students are required to read and understand the course content by themselves. To create easy and enjoyable learning environment, modules of this course are designed to be self-instructional and self-contained, and it is equipped with self-assessment exercises and formative tests. Modules with those criteria can replace the presence of a physical lecturer or tutor in the learning process.

While in the synchronous system, this course is completed with the online tutorial. The students who have signed up for the online tutorial of this course can access the full course by entering through their personal usernames and passwords to log in and access all enrolled courses during the semester. The students are requested to communicate with tutors using chatting and discussion forum. To implement the synchronous system, the program provides online tutorials in eight week period in order to gain optimum results of the learning process. Each week the participants are to learn a topic initiated by the tutor and then you do some assignments and read other supporting learning materials. Online tutorial is aimed to optimize the use of the internet to provide learning support services to students. This kind of online tutorial may allow the process of distance learning in the design of more interactive and communicative instruction by using links. It also provides an alternative option for students who have access to the internet to obtain optimal learning support services.

Students taking this course. Students taking this course need to register at the beginning of the semester. They need to buy printed module of this course as the main media for the independent learning. In learning this course, the students are required to read and understand each module. Students are advised to study the learning materials in the suggested sequence, and not to move to the following module whenever their achievement of the learning process of the particular module is still below 80%. They need to re-learn the materials of the module again. However, when the achievement of the learning process is 80% or above, they can continue to the next module. Since this course demands the students to conduct English teaching practice, the students have to conduct the teaching practice at school in which they work. For example, they can do practice to identify research problem and formulate teaching problem in English language teaching. Students are also suggested to take part in online tutorial of this course. They have to actively participate during the online tutorial by reading the initiation, taking part in forum and do all the assignments.

Media used. This course contains 60% of the materials discussing the theoretical research procedure in teaching and learning English. The rest of 40% provides the learners to practice in their own teaching. To facilitate the delivery system, this course is completed with printed learning material as the main material for the students for the independent learning. To check the achievement of their learning process, this course also provides the online self exercises in the form of artificial final test covering the content of the course. The students can access this facility to do self assessment of how far the objectives of this course are reached. Another learning media is web based material that can be assessed in UT website. This material is an enrichment material to make the students get better understanding of the concept being learnt. To support learning process, this course is also completed with online tutorial offered to students.

Online Learning Support for “Research in ELT”

Design and development of online tutorial. The design of online tutorial covers the instructional delivery system and the media that support the online interaction and communication. The instructional delivery in online tutorial comprises the initiation, interaction, and assignment. Initiation is used to encourage students to learn the course content. The development of the online tutorial of this course begins with the preparation of instructional design and online learning material. The preparation starts with the development of course curriculum, learning material, online operational system, including online tutorial registration and the website. The following step is the implementation of the online tutorial that consists of introduction, learning process, interaction, and assessment. The online interaction is done by facilitating the discussion forum and chatting. Assessments as part of learning process are delivered through various tasks that meet the need of accomplishing the course competence. The final step for managing the online tutorial is the evaluation. The evaluation may refer to the system of the online tutorial related to the media used, the assessable of the system, the performance of tutor, learning material, the students’ participation, and the assessment of student learning.

Delivery of online tutorial. Online tutorial is a kind of learning support services for the UT distance students. In this tutorial, students’ learning activities carried out under the guidance of a tutor as learning facilitators. During online tutorials, tutor and students discuss matters that are considered difficult and very important to be mastered by students. For more details, the materials covered in the tutorial activities focus on the following discussion.

- a) essential competencies or important concepts in a course;
- b) problems found in student learning modules;
- c) issues related to the students inside or outside the classroom; and
- d) issues related to the application of concepts in everyday life.

An online tutorial is an additional service to assist students in the learning process. The students are required to participate in online tutorials on voluntary basis to suit their convenience. Reward is given to the students who follow the online tutorial and are active, and then students will get the contribution value as much as 30% to the final semester grade of this course.

Online tutorial components. To support distance learning process, this course is completed with the online tutorial. All students who register for this course have access to online tutorial at no additional charge. Online tutorial contains tutorial process of at least 3 types of activities, namely: Initiation, Discussion, and Assignments. It is performed as many as the total number of weeks predetermined by the university, namely 8 weeks in a semester. The initiation is a form material written by tutor in order to initiate learning process. Initiation can be made in several types: text pages, web pages, links to files or web or by displaying a directory there are several files inside it. The form of the initiation can be an activity such as reading text that function as supplement (enrichment material) to the students. It does not require feedback from the student. Discussion of activities are dedicated to the students to work on the questions, give answers as well as other take part in online discussions in non-real time environment.

Participating students. In online tutorial, students are required to actively participate during the online tutorial period of eight weeks. In order to follow the tutorial well, the students must read the printed modules as part of the preparation to active participation in the online tutorial. Thus all kinds of difficulties in understanding the materials in printed modules can be discussed with the tutor and with fellow students. To take part in discussion forum, the students can view the contents of the discussion topics, then they have to click on the title of the discussion, after which the screen will appear to provide feedback. To give feedback on the discussion topic, the students can click "Response", then it will appear a form for them to write their response, and then they have to click the "Post to forum" for sending feedback.

In addition to giving feedback on the online discussion, the students are also possible to create a new discussion topic. This allows them to talk with tutors about course content that is considered difficult. To create a new topic in the discussion forum, the students just click on the "Add" button topic for a new discussion, after which the form will appear where they can write the topic they want to discuss with tutors and peers. After they have finished writing the title and subject for discussion, they can click on the post to the forum to send a new topic for online discussion.

Another part of online tutorial that should be followed by the students is the assignment. There are three assignments that should be answered by the students. The assignments are given in the third, fifth and seventh week respectively during the online tutorial session. Almost the same as the above two types of activities, to see the assignment that has been given by the tutor, the students need to click the title of the assignment, after the assignment is clicked it will show the full content of the tasks that have been prepared by the tutor. The students can just go ahead and read the material carefully and then answer the assignment.

Students online learning style. Students taking this course are mostly adult students, who are teachers of English in junior and senior high schools. These adult students have professional experiences, which are supposed to be the good start to be able to get involved in any learning situation. This condition is helpful to students in a distance learning environment. In distance learning, the main media for learning is providing suitable learning environment for students with different needs and flexibility. Some online students tend to focus on getting the good mark in online tutorial, so they work on all the assignments well. Other students are fond of getting knowledge through learning process and interaction with tutor and peers, and they will take part in all initiations given, and all discussions of topics.

Online tutoring style. Tutors in online tutorial are encouraged to determine the appropriate methods to deliver the course content. Therefore they have to select a variety of methods and techniques to create the interesting learning process during the online tutorial (Simonson, *et al.*, 2012, p. 203). Since the delivery system of this course is both in asynchronous and synchronous mode, tutor should be wise enough to create learning activities based on the environment type of instructional delivery. Whenever the synchronous mode is in place, such as in discussion or chatting, tutor may apply some of classroom instructional approaches. On the other hands, in the asynchronous style, tutor needs to decide which instructional strategies that encourage independent learning process.

Assessment of student learning. Assessment of this course is intended to accumulate the information from each learner using assessment tools. Simonson, *et al.* (2012.p.263) defined assessment as the process of measuring, documenting and interpreting behavior demonstrated by learners. To gain the information to decide the value of the student's competence of this course is conducted on the basis of the assignment, participation, discussion, and semester examination. The contribution in online tutorial is weighed for participation 20%, discussion 30 %, and assignments 50%. These criteria all together contribute as much as

30% to the result of the final semester grade. All students have to take final semester examination, and the semester examination of this course is in the form of objective test.

Conclusion

The online learning support for the course “Research in ELT” has been designed to assist student learning in ways that enhance student understanding of the course. Better understanding of the course will help improve the English language teaching practice of the teacher students. Students are equipped and trained in the use of research to improve English language teaching. Students participating in the online tutorial of the course learn from tutor as well as peers. Those peers are also practicing teachers. In this way, students can share and learn from good professional practice of their peers. Online tutorials also broadens students practical experience in the use of new media and instructional technology, particularly in “Research in ELT. They can explore further materials to improve their English language teaching classes in their own schools.

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